

The Affordable Care Act (ACA): Where Do We Go From Here

Yesterday's decision by the Supreme Court broadly affirming the constitutionality of the Affordable Care Act clears the decks for the public mental health system in the State of California but particularly here in Los Angeles County to launch the next phase in making a system that creates real opportunities for hope, wellness, and recovery in the lives of persons with mental illness. It looks like we placed the right bet. In Los Angeles, we assumed that the right thing to do was to take every opportunity to start to build the systems and the relationships that would integrate health, mental health, and substance use treatment because integrated care provides for better outcomes whether or not the ACA stood the constitutional test. Now that the test has been passed, we can accelerate our process of re-imagining our system of care as an even more comprehensive service than we have in the past.

I want to recognize the work that has already been done. Every part of our Department including our clinics, our financial and IT staff, our administrators and our analysts, and our clerical and support staff have been involved in stretching our system to incorporate the new clients and the new services associated with the expansion of eligibility for mental health care under the 1115 Waiver. Here in Los Angeles the expansion of eligibility allowed for in the waiver took place under the mantle of Health Way L.A. The 1115 Waiver, as you will recall, is the "bridge to health reform" and now we know that it is not a bridge to nowhere.

In 2014, there will be a significant expansion of the populations our mental health systems will serve and substantial new federal resources. The fact that the Supreme Court ruled that states cannot be forced to participate in the eligibility expansion for Medicaid means that those states (like California) that do expand may have more resources available to them that would have gone to the states that choose not to participate. But there are risks: the major risk is that people will have the choice in 2014 to choose where they go to get their mental health care. We need to provide a level of quality and customer service so that when they choose, they choose us.

But the exciting challenges are just beginning. We know that we will have to set up in the next eighteen months the clinical capacity, the administrative structures, the care coordination functionality, and the trusting partnerships that will be required to make full implementation of the ACA possible in 2014. The 1115 Waiver has expanded services to relatively low income adults, but with full implementation of Health Reform the service expansion for mental health services will be much broader and will include children as well. A quick list at our "to do" list is fairly daunting, but it might be comforting to recognize that California is ahead of any other jurisdiction in the United States in its preparation for Health Reform and Los Angeles County is in the lead of counties in California in its readiness despite our size and that DMH is farther advanced in its preparation than other players in the LA market.

So, I think our preparation is being rewarded and working together we will be ready for the next phase. Let's do it. Si se puede!